The Builder.

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OUR old friend, of whom we spoke a fortnight ago* (let us call him Senex, for shortness), has been kept in London ever since, in consequence, as he says, of one of two references which brought him to town being before a barrister instead of an architect. He is of too kindly a disposition to hate anything much, but *certes* he has little love for barristers as a class, who, he maintains, in their professional capacity, uniformly insult an architect or a surveyor when they get him under cross-examination in the witness-box. Without going the whole way with our friend in this opinion, we must admit its correctness in the case of several individual members of the bar, who seem never to have arrived at a knowledge of the fact, that an architect is a gentleman. If any of them should chance to see this remark, we hope it may not be lost upon them.

"As to this present reference," said Senex, "we have had three times the number of meetings that were necessary, because the referee knows less than nothing of the matters in question. When I say less than nothing, I mean that the few notions he has upon it are all erroneous, so that they have to be unlearned. If disputants on questions involving knowledge of construction, prices, architectural jurisprudence, &c., would refer their disputes *before* going into court instead of afterwards, as they are usually led to do, they would not be forced to name a barrister for referee, and would moreover save costs."

Better, still, if they avoid both trial *and* reference, eh? Law is an expensive affair, even to the winner, and should be the last resource. The position of an arbitrator is a most honourable one: that architects do not oftener fill it is partly their own fault.

"I hear that the architect of the French Opera, Mons. Debret, is dead. Do you know anything of his history?"

"The March number of the *Revue des Beaux Arts, Tribune des Artistes*, published under the auspices of the *Société Libre des Beaux Arts*, in Paris, contains a brief notice of Mons. Debret, written by Mons. Petit, an architect. Debret was an artist of considerable talent, a favourite pupil of Percier and Fontaine, and a member of the French Institute, but, not advancing with the times, allowed younger men to pass him. His life was chequered: he had some triumphs and more sorrows. In 1820, when the removal of the opera was determined on, the honour of constructing the new theatre was conferred on Debret, and the result proved most satisfactory: so much so, that the commission to build the theatre *des Nouveautés*, was really forced upon him. Here, however, from some cause unexplained, he was so unsuccessful, that this theatre, now called the *Vaudeville*, has been altered twenty times without remedying all its defects. From this period his troubles commenced. Some years later he was displaced from the conduct of the works at the cathedral of St. Denis, and was succeeded by M. Viollet-Leduc; and then his son, who had evinced much talent, and of whom he was very fond, died. In 1847 the Government determined on the restoration of the Opera House, and to the great disappointment of Debret, who naturally expected to have the conduct of the works, intrusted them to M. Rohault de Fleury, and as a consolation to Debret, appointed the latter a member of the Council of Civil Buildings, which added 240*l.* per annum to his income, but prevented him from undertaking any architectural work. After the revolution of February, however, he was struck off the list, on the plea of economy. He was then more than seventy, and this was the finishing blow. He left Paris, and at St. Cloud arranged for himself a modest residence, where he hoped yet to spend a few years in calm retirement,—but it was not to be. He died, his biographer says, on his work, like a Spartan on his shield!"

"Ah," sighed our friend, "we architects (I feel myself scarcely worthy of the noble title) have difficulties to contend against, but none greater than those which arise from the ignorance of the public. The jealous feeling which architects are said to evince is scarcely to be wondered at when it is remembered how much they suffer from the ignorant presumption of those on whom they must nevertheless depend. I met with some remarks on this head in an article on your journal in the *Globe* newspaper the other day, which seemed to me so true that I cut them out. Here they are:—'The masters of other arts,' says the writer, 'are at least able to command their materials, and realize their conceptions. A painter will scarcely fail to produce, himself, for mere lack of canvass and colours, or even a sculptor for want of a block of marble to warm into life. But every evidence of an architect's genius must for ever rest buried in his portfolio, if he cannot find liberal private or public patronage to supply him with space, stone, and funds. His talents must first find appreciation before he can show them, in any outward shape. Now, this requires a degree of discernment which, perhaps, is not brought to the inspection of architectural drawings by one person in ten thousand; yet the nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine are no whit less confident in their preferences than the one fit judge. Hence it happens that designs for buildings (where competition is admitted at all) are much more likely to be selected for some flagrant enormity, than any appropriate beauty. Our recipe for a rising architect, who would bear off the prize from his competitors, would be something of this sort:—Take your portico from Rome—take your tower, if you will, from Babel—never mind where you put them, or whether they fit, as regards any of the purposes, or any of the other dimensions, of the edifice,—only take care they are bold and big enough—sufficiently projected in light and shade to strike the dullest eye. If your design has merit, the one *Enormity* will bribe recognition of it; if not, the same splendid disproportion will, in all likelihood, atone for its absence.'"

It ought to be the endeavour of architects to remove this ignorance, and to assist, to the extent of their ability, all who are labouring in that work. Who but an architect knows the difficulties under which his works are produced,—the numerous causes of results beyond his control, for which, nevertheless, he is blamed? Mr. Welby Pugin, in a pamphlet called "Some Remarks on Articles which have recently appeared in the *Rambler* relative to Ecclesiastical Architecture and Decoration," has a strong passage bearing on this, but, like most of us, thinks few have been so unfortunate in that respect as himself. "I have passed my life," he writes, "in thinking of fine things, studying fine things, designing fine things, and realizing very poor ones. I have never had the chance of producing a single fine ecclesiastical building, except my own church, where I am both paymaster and architect, but everything else, either for want of adequate funds or injudicious interference and control, or some other contingency, is more or less a failure. In the process of canonization there is always a devil's advocate, and I am satisfied that there is the same personage in the erection of every church, who contrives to mar the result. Sometimes he appears in the character of a furious committee-man, sometimes as a prejudiced ecclesiastic, sometimes in the form of a liberal benefactor, sometimes as a screw, but there he is in some character or other, thrusting in his claw and spoiling the job. St. George's (Lambeth) was spoilt by the very instructions laid down by the committee, that it was to hold 3,000 people on the floor, at a limited price; in consequence height, proportion, everything was sacrificed to meet these conditions. Nottingham was spoilt by the style being restricted to lancet—a period well suited to a Cistercian abbey in a secluded vale, but very unsuitable for the centre of a crowded town. If fine tracery windows admitting a due proportion of light had been introduced, it would have been a grand and satisfactory building; but this it was impossible to attain, and even the width of the lights was regulated, so there was nothing left but to make the best of it under the circumstances, and the result has been what might be expected: the church is too dark, and *I am blamed for it*. Kirkman was spoilt through several hundred pounds being reduced on the original estimate: to effect this, which was a great sum in proportion to the entire cost, the area of the church was contracted, the walls lowered, tower and spire reduced, the thickness of walls diminished, and stone arches omitted. When completed, the building was found to be too small for the congregation, its proportions stunted, and I believe the rev. author of this mistake has never ceased to deplore it: from the time it was impossible to remedy it. Both the collegiate chapels I have erected have been spoilt for want of a sufficient sum expended in the first instance, on *thick* walls and *stout buttresses*, omissions which no subsequent amount of enrichment or expenditure can redeem."

"And yet," interposed Senex, "Pugin is thought a wonderfully lucky fellow by most architects, and they sigh for such opportunities as he has had, to show what they are made of."

But let us read a little further. "I could show," he continues, "were it not tedious, that it is everywhere the same. In our days a certain sum is named as the ultimatum of cost, without due consideration whether it is adequate for the description or dimensions of the church required, and this is the standard by which style, proportion, material, and detail is to be regulated. At first the unfortunate architect, not having the full fear of the tremendous figures impressed on his mind, ventures to indulge in an extensive plan, solid walls, and fine proportions; he thinks of glorious examples of ancient work, and rejoices in moulded arches, and stone jambs, and window reveals; he may even be audacious enough to imagine a clerestory, and fine lofty chancel.—but the day of reckoning comes, the quantities are taken out, and the estimate commences.

* See p. 88, *ante*.

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